

Sinning to Death

1 John 5:16-17 If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death.

When I was a boy, before I came to trust Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour, I used to speak about white lies and black lies. Whenever I had told a lie, I would console myself, or when necessary, defend myself by saying, "It was just a white lie." You see, white lies, to me, were not as bad as black lies. And I can't remember ever admitting that I'd told a black lie.

Now if you'd asked me what makes a lie white and pure, and what makes it really bad, I'm not sure I would have been able to tell you. The truth is, I was trying, like most sinners do, to make my sin seem less serious by pretending that it was a light sin, small sin, harmless sin.

In fact, when you speak with people today about sin, this is almost the reflex response – I don't sin in big ways. I sin in small, manageable, relatively harmless ways. Big, evil, dark sins are what other people do. We usually are happy with those categories, because we can always keep repainting our sins as white sins. That is, until we read the Bible and when we read the Bible, we find that all sin is evil in God's sight. Once something is sin, it falls short of the glory of God, and is enough to separate you from God forever. A stain on a white shirt makes it a stained shirt, however big or small. A crack in a windscreen makes it a cracked windscreen, however small or great. God regards all sin as what disqualifies us from eternal life. Only the righteousness of Jesus Christ can make us acceptable before a holy God.

At the same time, the Bible does make it very clear that sin has differing consequences. All sin makes us sinful and alienated from God, but not all sin has equally devastating consequences in this life or the next. Here in this passage, we are confronted with what seems to be a frightening prospect - the sin to death.

John is winding down his book on what eternal life looks like. He's just been teaching on prayer – and how believers can expect to have their prayers answered as they pray in God's will. To illustrate that, he has used what seems like an extreme example – praying for believers who are sinning. And on the way he teaches us exactly this truth: sin is sin, but not all sins have the same results. John tells us in verse 17 that while all unrighteousness is sin, there is a sin or a kind of sinning that does not lead to death, while in the middle of verse 16 he tells us there is a sin or a kind of sinning that does lead to death. His instructions on prayer relate to those two different kinds. If the person sins, but not the sin to death, then prayer ought to be made. If the person sins the sin to death, John seems to say that prayer will not be helpful.

What is this sin unto death? And why will prayer not help the person who has sinned in this way? If there really is a sin that I can commit which leaves me beyond even the prayers of others – what is it?

Our focus is going to be to answer the question, what is the sin unto death?

When a passage like this makes such drastic statements, but it is not explained anywhere else in the same book or in the rest of the New Testament, interpretations abound. You can read commentary after commentary, and they come to different conclusions. So we have to come to this text with a certain amount of humility and say, it's impossible to say with absolute certainty. There just isn't enough clear information to be dogmatic. However, we can say that we think one interpretation is

more likely than another.

So before I show you what I think is the most likely interpretation, I want to give you three interpretations that are often given to explain this sin to death. Once we've done that, I want us to ask four questions of this text that will help us to understand what John is getting at. But let's begin with three views on what the sin unto death is.

The first view is that John is speaking of a particular kind of sin, the sin of murder. In this view, John is saying that for most sins, God forgives, but once you commit the sin of murder, there is no point in praying for such a person, because the punishment for murder instituted by God after the fall is death. The problem with this view is that there are several people in the Bible who committed murder, but God did not require their death. David murdered Uriah. One could say that Paul murdered several Christians, particularly Stephen. The fact is, murder is covered by the atoning work of Jesus Christ, like every sin and God has certainly not killed every single murderer.

The second view is that John is referring to the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, we have the incident recorded where the Pharisees said that Jesus was casting out demons by the prince of demons Beelzebub. Jesus responds to that by firstly pointing out that it would be self-defeating for Satan to cast out Satan. Jesus then says that by attributing the Holy Spirit's work in and through Him to Satan, they are blaspheming the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 12:31 Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men.

Now there are some good reasons in support of this view. First, Jesus clearly says that once you commit this sin, it can't be forgiven. Or, to put it like John, there isn't much point praying for it. Second, Jesus said that the blasphemy of the Spirit was to reject the witness of the Spirit concerning Christ. Similarly, John has been saying throughout this epistle that if you deny that Jesus has come in the flesh, it is the spirit of antichrist.

1 John 4:2-3 By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world.

So, like the Pharisees, you see the witness of the Spirit testifying that Jesus is the Christ, and you deny it all, call God a liar, and say that the Spirit's work is the work of Satan. This, according to this view, would be the sin leading to death. There is no forgiveness for this sin, and no point praying for it.

The problems with this view are several. First, it is really remote from the context. John hasn't even alluded to it. In fact, John doesn't mention that in his Gospel. It's hard to believe that John expected his readers to connect these words with the blasphemy of the Spirit, without any other clues. Second, John seems to place these two kinds of sins on a professing brother. No one would be amongst the ranks of Christians and be saying the kinds of things that constitute this kind of sin. While it explains some things, it is a bit of a stretch and expects too much of the reader.

A third view is that the sin to death refers to apostasy. Let's take a moment to define apostasy. Apostasy is different from unbelief. An unbeliever is simply one who has been exposed to the gospel and has rejected it, however many times. The unbeliever may have more or less familiarity with the gospel, but he never claims to believe it.

A apostate is someone different. An apostate becomes thoroughly acquainted with the teachings of the gospel, and claims to believe them. He gets on the inside of the Christian community by claiming to believe the Word. He is more than a little familiar with the gospel, he is seeing it lived out in front of him by other Christians, hearing them profess it, hearing it preached, defended and taught. But then, at some point, he turns around and denies the truth, or distorts the truth, while still claiming to be a Christian.

The book of Hebrews has very strong warnings for those who become very familiar with the truth, but do not fully embrace it, and then walk away from it.

Hebrews 6:4-8 For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵ and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶ if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame. ⁷ For the earth which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it, and bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessing from God; ⁸ but if it bears thorns and briars, it is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned.

There is no doubt that apostasy will be severely judged by God because it is more culpable since it has received more light, and is responsible for confusing and misleading others.

Jesus was speaking of apostates when he said:

"John 9:39-41 And Jesus said, 'For judgment I have come into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may be made blind.'" ⁴⁰ Then some of the Pharisees who were with Him heard these words, and said to Him, 'Are we blind also?' ⁴¹ Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, 'We see.' Therefore your sin remains.

Now some of the puzzle pieces fit the sin to death. Firstly, we have some reference here in 1 John to apostasy, so maybe John expects us to still have that in mind. Second, the passages in Hebrews show that spiritual death awaits apostates. But then we come up on the same problem we hit previously. John expects us to be watching our fellow believers for these sins not leading to death, or possibly even, the sin leading to death. As John makes clear earlier, the apostate was never a believer to begin with.

While two of those views are good guesses, I think they are a stretch. I'm going to suggest a fourth view. And what I want us to do is to ask four questions of this text and of the rest of 1 John. When a text seems really obscure, the first thing we should do is go hunting in the rest of the same book, looking for clues from the context. If John expected his original readers to know what he meant without reading the book of Hebrews, it's probably because he is saying something here, in a different way, that he has already said.

So here are four questions we want to ask this text.

- 1) What does John mean by 'brother'?
- 2) What kind of life and death is John talking about?
- 3) How has John spoken about sin in a believer's life?
- 4) In what kind of state would prayer no longer be effective?

I. What Does John Mean by 'Brother'?

1 John 5:16 If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death.

Now our knee-jerk reaction is to say, *brother* means *fellow-Christian*. And we would be right, most of the time. However, John hasn't used it in that sense only. Look at 2:9-11

1 John 2:9-11 He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. ¹⁰ He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him. ¹¹ But he who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going,

Notice John says, he who hates his brother, which would seem to mean the person is a Christian – is in darkness. Clearly, if you are in darkness, you are not a believer. So why does John say 'his brother'? John means one who **claims** to be a Christian, and therefore claims that this is his brother. He claims a relationship, but his hatred shows that no such relationship actually exists.

To make the point even clearer, look at:

1 John 3:14-15 ¹⁴ We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love his brother abides in death. ¹⁵ Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

So when John uses the word 'brother', what does he mean? He means 'professing brother'. He means one who makes the claim to be a Christian.

So back to 5:16.

1 John 5:16 If anyone sees his [professing] brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that.

The person who commits either sins not leading to death, or sins leading to death, is a person who professes to be a Christian. That rules out apostates, and it rules out those who would deny Christ. Even if they aren't saved, they are at least making the right claims with their lips, which makes them at least brothers in name.

2) What kind of life and death is John talking about?

1 John 5:16 If anyone sees his [professing] brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that.

Now you can tell that John is using life and death as opposites here. John either means physical life and physical death, or spiritual life and spiritual death. John is not going to mix and match physical and spiritual in the same verse.

Now certainly, there are examples in the Bible of people who lost their physical lives because of sin. Some believers at Corinth died because they profaned the Lord's Supper. Ananias and Saphira died when they tried to deceive the church about their sin. Several Old Testament characters died because of their sin – Achan, Nadab & Abihu, Uzza. So one could argue that what is meant here is that certain sins will bring physical death.

The problem with that view is this: John says that if you see your professing brother sinning a sin

which does not lead to death, you will ask and God will give him life. If he hasn't sinned a deathly sin, then he hasn't died, so why and how does God give that person physical life? He's already alive!

It makes more sense that John is speaking about spiritual life and death. When a believer sins a sin not leading to spiritual death, others pray, and God grants renewal, restored fellowship, more abiding life to that believer. However, there is sin to spiritual death, and John does not think prayer will be effective there.

What has John been talking about throughout the whole epistle? Eternal life. What kind of life is that? It is spiritual. The kind of death John means is the absence of eternal life. It is being without Christ's life and eventually being separated from God for all eternity.

So now we have two of our clues: This is a professing believer. If he sins in a certain way, we pray, and God keeps renewing and continuing the good work which He has began in Him. But, if he sins in another way, he dies spiritually. Question: Can a true believer die spiritually? No. So what kind of man would be the kind who sins the sin to death? One who claims to be a believer, but is not, and ultimately experiences confirmed spiritual death.

So that leads us to the third, and biggest question.

3) How has John spoken about sin in a believer's life?

John has told us several things about believers and sin.

Back in 1:8-10 he told us that believers will sin but when they do, they will not deny their sin nature or their acts of sin, but will instead confess them. They will lean on Christ their Advocate. Then in chapter 3, he taught us something very important regarding how repetitive or how habitual sin is in those who profess Christ.

1 John 3:4-10 Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness. ⁵ And you know that He was manifested to take away our sins, and in Him there is no sin. ⁶ Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him. ⁷ Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous. ⁸ He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil. ⁹ Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God. ¹⁰ In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother.

When someone sins in a habitual, unrestrained way, John says this is a sign of not having God's nature. If you don't have God's life, then what are you? Spiritually dead,

Because believers are born of God, the habit if their lives is going to be to practise righteousness. One born of God does not make a lifetime practise of sin, sinning without repentance. He sins, but then confesses. He sins and fights his sin. He wrestles with it. His sin is a fall, not a walk.

Very significantly, John repeats this idea right after the verses we're looking at.

1 John 5:18 We know that whoever is born of God does not sin; but he who has been born of God keeps himself, and the wicked one does not touch him.

Paul makes the same kinds of statements.

Galatians 5:21 envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

1 Corinthians 6:9-10 ⁹ ¶ Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.

Because you are guilty of an isolated act does not mean you are spiritually dead. But if you make a practice of this, it shows you do not have eternal life. You are a 'so-called' brother – a professing brother, but not a true brother, not a true Christian.

John is using sin and sinning in a general sense. Our English translations supply the indefinite 'a', which is not wrong, but it is not necessarily right either. You can also translate it 'sin' in general. John doesn't specify the sin, and it is because he wants us to focus on the manner of sinning, not the type of sin. It is not a type of sin, it is a *kind of sinning*. Habitual, practising, walking in sin, is the kind of sin that leads to death – eternal, spiritual death.

So let's tie the leads together. We have a professing believer who does have spiritual life, and sins. Other pray for him, and God keeps renewing and restoring the life he has.

On the other hand, we have a professing believer who does not have spiritual life and proves that by sinning as a way of life. He is spiritually dead, and his lifestyle of habitual sinning proves him to be that way.

OK, but isn't all sin unto spiritual death? Doesn't Romans 6:23 say the wages of sin is death? So if the person is already spiritually dead, why would John say that their lifestyle of sin is a sin to death?

I think the answer is this: all unbelievers are spiritually dead, but not all unbelievers sin to the point of confirming that state. Not all unbelievers reach a place where repentance is impossible for them. And that leads us to our last question, which is, What kind of state would prayer no longer be effective?

Let's say you have a professing believer who sins and keep sinning, and does not confess his sins, and keeps on sinning. He hears preaching and feels some kind of conviction, but he keeps up his sinful lifestyle. Others come to him and rebuke him and try to restore him. He does not repent, and is eventually placed under church discipline, that he might be ashamed, But even there, he is not ashamed. There may come a point where he is totally hardened to the gospel and the Lord, and is revealing his unregenerate state. He has sinned to a place of utter rejection.

He has so stubbornly resisted the abundant light that he received, that God eventually, like He did with Pharaoh, hardens the man's heart, and confirms him in his rebellion.

Do you remember that terrible scene in Pilgrim's Progress?

Christian and Interpreter come across a man in an iron cage. Christian asks him who he is.

“Back. The man said, ‘I was once a fair and flourishing professor, both in mine own eyes and also in the eyes of others: I once was, as I thought, fit for the Celestial City, and had then even joy at the

thoughts that I should get thither."

Chr. Well, but what are you now?

Back. am now a man of despair, and am shut up in it, as in this iron cage. I cannot get out; oh now, I cannot!

Chr. But how did you come into this condition?

Back. I stopped watching and being sober; I laid the reins upon the neck of my lusts; I sinned against the Light of the World, and the goodness of God. I have grieved the Spirit, and he is gone. I tempted the devil, and he is come to me. I have provoked God to anger, and he has left me. I have so hardened my heart, that I cannot repent.

...

Chr. Then said CHRISTIAN, Is there no hope, but you must be kept in the iron cage of despair?

Back. No, none at all!

Chr. Why? The Son of the Blessed is very merciful.

Back. I have crucified him to myself afresh;

I have despised his person;

I have despised his righteousness; I have counted his blood an unholy thing; I have done despite to the Spirit of grace: therefore I have shut myself out of all the promises, and there now remains to me nothing but threatenings--dreadful threatenings --fearful threatenings, of certain judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour me as an adversary.

Chr. For what reason did you bring yourself into this condition?

Back. For the lusts, pleasures, and profits of this world; in the enjoyment of which I did then promise myself much delight; but now everyone of those things also bite me and gnaw me like a burning worm.

Chr. But can you not now repent and turn?

Back. God hath denied me repentance. His Word gives me no encouragement to believe: yea, he himself hath shut me up in this iron cage; nor can all the men in the world let me out.

The kind of man who knows the truth but keeps hardening his heart to it as a way of life reveals his spiritually dead state, and God may eventually confirm him in that state. If so, John says, I do not say you should pray for such a one.

What is the sin to death? It is a kind of sinning. It is the habitual sinning of the unbeliever which eventually leads them to a place where they no longer respond to the call of the Spirit.

True believers sin. When they sin, they confess their own sins, and other Christians are praying for their spiritual growth. God keeps them growing in the life they have in Christ. Christians fight. They fight to lay hold on eternal life. They pray for each other. They restore each other. They seek to break habits of sin in each others' lives. They warn each other about sin patterns that seem to be developing. We do not let the paint of sin dry on one another.

False believers sin. But they do not fight their sin, or hate their sin. They excuse their sin. They rationalise their sin. They keep on sinning. They do not hear rebuke, reproof, or even discipline. They come to a place where their conscience is so seared, their heart so hardened, that it seems like nothing will help them. John does not say we must not pray for them; he just seems unconvinced that it will be effective in such cases.

What this means is this: if you are worried that you have committed the sin to death, then you haven't. People who sin to the point of utter hardening are not at all worried about their sin. They hardly feel a pang of conscience any more.

But the warning is this: kill sin or it will be killing you! Sin is an anaesthetic and a sedative. The more of it you take, the less aware you become to its presence. The more of it you commit, the less sensitive you are to it. Sin wants to become habitual in your life. If you have truly trusted Christ as your Life, then you must keep confessing and forsaking sin, and making a habit of righteousness.